



Karachi's fate

IN the aftermath of the Gul Plaza fire, a war of words has erupted between the MQM and PPP over the poor state of civic affairs in Karachi, with the two federal coalition partners blaming each other for the decrepit condition of the megacity. In a presser on Thursday, the MQM claimed the PPP, which rules Sindh, was responsible for “chronic misgovernance” in Karachi, holding the party responsible for Gul Plaza and similar past disasters. The PPP replied in the same coin, with the Sindh information minister referring to the MQM’s past — and not entirely unearned — reputation for political violence. In a strange solution to the city’s urban woes, Federal Health Minister Mustafa Kamal, a former mayor of the city, called for placing Karachi under federal control.

This is a very bad idea. It goes against the spirit of devolution as envisaged in the 18th Amendment, and can lead to ethnic strife in Sindh. Moreover, one can also question how efficiently the entities the centre currently controls are performing. The fact is that by engaging in mudslinging, both the MQM and PPP are deflecting attention from the real question: what ails Karachi and who is responsible? It would not be wrong to say that all parties, at the centre and the provincial level, including the MQM and PPP, are responsible for the city’s plight. Parties that have ruled at the centre, such as the PML-N and PTI, seem hardly interested in the Sindh capital’s future, with the former not having a major vote bank in the city, while the latter ignored Karachi despite bagging the majority of the metropolis’s National Assembly seats in 2018. As for the PPP, despite ruling Sindh for nearly two decades, its attempts to fix Karachi’s issues are cosmetic at best and negligence at worst. The MQM, which in the past enjoyed unparalleled power in Karachi, ‘gifted’ the city extortion, strikes and land-grabs (also known as ‘china cutting’). Hence the MQM criticising the PPP, or vice versa, is a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

Instead of unwise schemes such as making Karachi a federal territory, the solution lies in better and more responsive local government. Here the PPP has indeed blocked attempts at reforming the LG law in such a way that the third tier would become fully empowered. Instead, provincial ministers and bureaucrats still cling to what should be purely local powers. Even the ADB, in a 2024 report, has noted that “the devolution of funds and functionalities to the city has been poor”. This must change. Instead of dragging each other through the mud, the PPP, MQM and other parties interested in Karachi’s welfare must reform the LG law so that the city can become a more liveable place.

Asset disclosures

THE ruling coalition has previously faced criticism for legislating in ways that appear to prioritise the interests of lawmakers over those of the public. Against this backdrop, the passage of new legislation which will restrict public access to parliamentarians’ asset declarations warrants scrutiny. This week, the National Assembly passed a law allowing lawmakers to keep their assets confidential if they can demonstrate that disclosure “would pose a serious threat to the life or safety” of themselves or their family. While they still need to submit a “complete and true statement of assets and liabilities” to the Election Commission of Pakistan, the law raises serious concerns about whether confidential disclosure alone can meaningfully serve the purpose of public accountability. Furthermore, there seems to be no clear mechanism for independent, credible auditing of the confidential declarations made, and it seems exemption requests will be the prerogative of the leaders of different legislatures. Safeguards against potential abuse have not been discussed and, given our challenge of selective accountability and weak institutional enforcement, this should not be ignored. Asset declarations are not a procedural formality; they are meant to be a check on conflicts of interest.

It is concerning that the law aims to restrict public oversight in an area where transparency is essential. Elected representatives are empowered by the public and exert immense influence over public resources. In democratic systems, this delegation of power entails an increased obligation to be transparent, especially with respect to one’s own finances. Here, the government has defended the law as an attempt to strike “a balance between transparency and protection of individual rights”, arguing that the publication of asset declarations could compromise the security and privacy of legislators and their families. While concerns about personal safety in a volatile political setting should not be dismissed outright, demanding secrecy in financial matters is neither necessary nor proportionate. Across the democratic world, public officials accept reduced financial privacy as a condition of holding office. It is not a punitive measure but a credibility-enhancing one that protects both public trust and the integrity of officeholders. The decision to expand secrecy, rather than refine transparency, places Pakistan at odds with these norms. Confidential disclosures to the ECP, whose own independence has been questioned in recent years, cannot be a substitute for public scrutiny.

Lives suspended

STATEMENTS by Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti, insisting that the state cannot be blamed for “self-imposed disappearances” reflect an often looked-over detail in the public discourse on missing persons: not everyone listed as missing has been forcibly picked up. Some people do go into hiding, leave voluntarily, or cross borders to join terrorist groups. Any discussion must factor in this complexity. However, acknowledging this truth does not mean the erasing of another. Hundreds of families across Balochistan — and beyond — continue to live not knowing what happened to a son, a brother, a husband. For them, it is not a matter of propaganda or counter-narratives. It is a simple question of survival, both psychological and economic. Years pass with no answers, no bodies to bury, no confirmation to allow mourning to begin. Lives remain suspended in a cruel limbo.

The CM’s claim that new legal frameworks, detention rules and witness protection laws will end enforced disappearances from Feb 1 is welcome in principle. Transparency, timely information, and judicial oversight are overdue. But new laws cannot replace follow-up on past cases. If the reforms apply only to future cases, they may offer reassurance going forward but leave past abuses unanswered. Families seek answers not just about tomorrow, but about yesterday. Where individuals are in custody, the state must disclose their whereabouts and legal status. Where people have died, families deserve confirmation and dignity. Where the state is not responsible, it must help trace individuals and document outcomes. The missing persons issue has been politicised. But misuse does not erase suffering at its core. Each unresolved case represents a household suspended between hope and despair. If the government is serious about restoring trust, it must pair new laws with an honest reckoning of unresolved cases, regular public reporting and engagement with affected families. Closure is not a concession to propaganda. It is a basic obligation of the state.

OPINION



BY AHMED BILAL MEHBOOB

Politics and governance

One emotive issue or the other has been the decisive factor in elections.

ALTHOUGH the primary function of any government, whether elected or not, is to govern effectively and provide services and development to the people, a great deal of politics is involved in the process, especially if it is an elected dispensation. Striking a balance between politics and effective governance is one of the foremost challenges of contemporary democracies. Elected governments are expected to provide better governance as they supposedly have greater awareness of people’s needs and preferences and are accountable to citizens.

In reality, many democratic countries, mostly in the developing world but now increasingly among the developed countries too, consider populism and emotive slogans appealing to religious, ethnic, provincial or national sensitivities to be a more effective strategy for electoral victory.

Pakistan has hardly seen an election where serious governance matters became poll issues. In most cases, one emotive issue or the other became the decisive factor in elections. For example, in the 1970 election, claims of exploitation of the resources of the then East Pakistan had inflamed the political climate, and the people of East Pakistan overwhelmingly voted for Sheikh Mujib who championed their rights. The 1988 election was contested in the tragic aftermath of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s execution and the PPP won while riding on a sympathy wave. The 2008 election took place against the backdrop of Benazir Bhutto’s assassination the previous year, and it was no surprise that the PPP won the election. The 2024 election was held when PTI chairman Imran Khan was in prison and his party was deprived of the right to contest elections on a common election symbol. The resultant resurgence of a sympathy wave for the PTI led to its supported candidates securing the highest share of votes and seats in the National Assembly.

Against this backdrop of repeated emotive poll campaigns, in which good governance remained effectively absent as an election issue, there was hardly any incentive for political parties to provide good governance and real development. Most of the development which took

place was in the form of grand, flashy, highly visible and expensive projects, which could be completed within a short span of two to three years so that the government could take its credit before an election. The political governments, which focused relatively more on better governance and long-term development, generally failed to impress the voters as highly emotive narratives dominated the election campaigns.

In a normal democracy and stable political environment, political parties should be contesting elections on the basis of their record of providing good governance and by proposing robust plans with financing strategies — not just wish lists — to resolve governance-related bottlenecks. Political parties generally do not see the benefit in putting so much time and effort into serious work, while emotive slogans and their effective use through the mainstream and social media, with some blessings from the intelligence agencies, can do the trick and they can come to power.

Given this background, it was gratifying to see that the present provincial and federal governments are shifting their focus to projecting their performance in governance and development through statistics. The PPP organised a well-attended roadshow in January in Islamabad, showcasing its performance in Sindh with party chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari personally leading the effort.

Hardly a fortnight goes by when the Punjab government is not launching new initiatives to address chronic governance issues. It has launched an effective garbage collection project and anti-encroachment campaign throughout the province, with even political opponents acknowledging the impact on the ground. Although it has been suspended by the court, a highly popular new law has been passed by the province to speedily end illegal occupation of immovable property in its effort to solve one of the most complex and torturous problems facing the people.

DG ISPR recently acknowledged the efforts in promoting grassroots development by the Balochistan government. These include the for-

mation of district development committees through which Rs1 billion (to be increased to Rs3bn in the next financial year) is being spent in each district in close consultation with the people of each district. In addition, the provincial government has ended the decades-old policing duality by integrating tribal levies into the regular police force.

Although the KP chief minister is charged with the responsibility of organising street protests across Pakistan for the release of his party’s founder Imran Khan and has been spending much time visiting other provinces and undertaking many such activities which must be distracting him from his primary duties of governing, he has lately started devoting time to law and order, education and healthcare issues. The provincial government may have to devote more time and effort to governance as the people may demand a resolution of their problems. It is inappropriate to entrust a chief minister with the task of organising street protests; this should have been the responsibility of party officials.

Generally, political parties do not prepare their officials for performing governance roles in case they come to power. Politicians are well-versed in organising political rallies, street protests, election campaigns, etc. They are hardly exposed to any orientation in governance until their party comes to power and they have to dive headlong into governance roles as ministers, chief ministers and prime ministers.

In such a situation, the performance of individuals and the government is generally disappointing. A case in point is the PTI federal government from 2018 to 2022; Imran Khan had to acknowledge that the party was not ready for governance. It is important that political parties organise formal briefings and training for their officials. This is another reason why the local government tier is made effective so that political workers and officials learn their way up the governance ladder. ■

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BY AFZAL ALI SHIGRI

What the mountains can teach us

THE heated debate in the National Assembly over the cutting of a few thousand paper mulberry trees in Islamabad was a pleasant surprise. The concern expressed by members across the political divide, if genuine, indicated that parliament may finally be turning its attention to substantive public interest issues. This approach should be broadened into a national conversation on the environmental degradation being witnessed in the ecological chain across the country.

Pakistan stands at the front lines of the global climate crisis. Glaciers are retreating, floods are becoming deadlier, water is growing scarcer, and weather patterns are losing their reliability for the Indus basin. Governments respond with reports, task forces and foreign-funded projects, yet disasters persist — with ever-increasing intensity. We ignore that the land that is now Pakistan once possessed a functioning climate civilisation of its own.

For instance, for over 2,000 years, societies in Gilgit-Baltistan, particularly Baltistan, Gilgit and Chilas, survived in one of the world’s harshest environments with remarkable stability. Long before the arrival of Buddhism and later Islam, the region was shaped by an indigenous belief system known as B n. It was more than a religion; it was a comprehensive environmental philosophy. Nature was not treated as dead matter but as morally alive. Mountains, glaciers, rivers, forests and wildlife were all understood as participants in a shared living world that deserved to be treated with respect. Thus they were protected as a collective community responsibility.

This worldview created what modern policy now calls ‘environmental governance’. Upper watersheds were sacred and protected. Glacier zones were restricted. Forests were regulated. Grazing followed strict seasonal rules. Hunting was controlled. These standards were enforced collectively. Violating nature meant violating community norms.

The heart of this system lay in seasonal festivals that structured life in the mountains. Even today, Baltistan celebrates May Fang on Dec 21, marking the winter peak and the return of light, and Nauroz, the spring festival of renewal. But these went beyond celebrations. They were regulatory events. May Fang reinforced survival discipline during the dangerous winter period. Nauroz reset agricultural schedules, irrigation systems, social contracts and land use. Other seasonal rituals controlled the opening of pastures, the protection of

glaciers during peak melt, the storage of harvests and preparation for famine.

The cultural ethos was so strong that locals who migrated to other parts of the world have continued to celebrate these events. When I was a child, Nauroz was celebrated with special dishes and there were boiled, coloured eggs alongside greenery on a plate. We continue this ritual even today. In effect, society moved in rhythm with climate and ecology.

When Buddhism arrived and later Islam, this environmental civilisation was not destroyed. It was ethically transformed. Sacred mountains became signs of divine creation. Conservation became a moral duty. Festivals became moments of gratitude and prayer. Islam, in particular, reinforced environmental discipline with extraordinary clarity. The Quran warns humanity not to “transgress the balance” of nature and declares human beings as stewards of creation. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) forbade waste of water even in the presence of a flowing river and

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declared that planting a tree was an act of charity. In the mountains, these principles merged naturally with existing ecological customs.

This fusion produced centuries of environmental stability in a region where survival itself is a constant struggle. Then, in the past 60 years, modern development dismantled this system. Roads, dams, concrete, mining and unregulated construction erased sacred geography. Seasonal rules collapsed under market pressures. Community authority weakened as centralised administration took over. Nature lost its moral meaning and became raw material. Towns are turning into sprawling *katchi abadis* spewing toxic gutter water that pollutes the clean sparkling streams.

The results are before us. Glaciers are melting faster. Floods are more violent. Springs are drying up. Food security is fragile. Conflicts over water and land are rising — not in this region alone; the entire country is suffering due to the criminal

neglect of Pakistan’s mountainous north. The tragedy is that Pakistan is now searching for climate solutions in foreign policy templates while ignoring a climate model that already existed within its own borders.

GB offers more than cultural nostalgia. It offers a framework of governance that modern policy desperately needs. The first lesson is that climate resilience cannot survive on technical planning alone. It requires cultural obedience. People protect what they believe in. Environmental law becomes powerful only when it is anchored in social values and moral conviction enforced by the community — not by green civil servants from other parts of the region in unplanned new district administrative units who, blind to local conditions, have only added more confusion to the chaotic administrative nightmare of small wasteful new revenue districts.

Second, ecological management must be seasonal, not continuous. Ancient societies understood that nature functions in cycles. Modern policy treats resources as permanently available. That illusion is collapsing.

Third, community institutions are not obstacles to development; they are its foundation. No climate policy will succeed if it bypasses the cultural intelligence of the people who live with the land.

Pakistan’s future climate policy must, therefore, undergo a fundamental shift. Environmental governance should be localised, culturally grounded and ethically reinforced. Protected climate zones must replace unregulated construction in watersheds and glacier buffers. Valley-level councils should regulate grazing, forestry and water according to seasonal cycles. Indigenous festivals should be formally integrated into disaster planning, water management and food security strategies. Education must restore the moral relationship between society and nature.

The mountains of Gilgit-Baltistan are not backward remnants of a forgotten past. They are a library of climate knowledge written over centuries of living with glaciers, avalanches, droughts and floods. Pakistan can either continue importing climate policy from abroad or learn from its own civilisation. The current policies are a recipe for disaster and portend an alarming future for our rivers, our farms, cities and Pakistan itself. ■

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